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TESTIMONY OF ROSE STRICKLAND, PUBLIC LANDS COMMITTEE CHAIR, TOIYABE
CHAPTER OF THE SIERRA CLUB, NEVADA AND EASTERN SIERRA
FOR THE FIELD HEARING OF THE HOUSE RESOURCES COMMITTEE, SUBCOMMITTEE
ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH, ELY, NEVADA, OCTOBER 27, 2003

Mr. Chairman, thank you for inviting me to testify today on forest and rangeland health in the Great Basin.

I am Rose Strickland, a citizen conservationist in Nevada. As a member of BLM's Nevada Resource Advisory Committee, I helped develop

standards and guidelines for healthy rangelands. Currently, I am the appointed environmental representative on the Nevada Governor's Sage

Grouse Conservation Planning Team and participated on a Nevada panel at the Western Governor's Association meeting in Salt Lake City last

year to discuss how the process is working. I also am a member of the Washoe-Modoc local planning group which has completed conservation

plans for 6 Sage Grouse population areas in Northwestern Nevada and Eastern California.

Great Basin ecosystems are threatened with a number of risks, as you've heard today from other panel members. Increasing catastrophic

wildfires, expanding noxious weed invasions, increasing loss and fragmentation of sagebrush communities and wildlife populations

dependent on them, declining conditions of riparian areas are also adversely affecting our communities dependent on public resources and

also dependent on clean water supplies from public watersheds. These are not "new" problems. Aldo Leopold wrote about the cheat grass

problem in SAND COUNTY ALMANAC in 1949. But our collective efforts since 1949 have not been sufficient to correct cheat grass invasion or

other problems.

The BLM's Great Basin Restoration Initiative is a good start at identifying our resources, assessing their conditions, determining which are at risk, and prioritizing restoration activities based on need and potential effectiveness. Restoring healthy rangelands and

forests is a powerful idea - everyone can support this. But we have yet to fully agree on what restoration is: is it pre-settlement conditions? more forage for livestock? more elk or Sage Grouse? Are pinyon-juniper woodlands "invading" shrublands or simply responding to unwise land management practices which help the trees out compete shrubs and grasses? Developing restoration goals and objectives through the current forest and public land use planning processes will give us a chance to build common definitions and a restoration vision based on the best available science as well as to help resolve our differences on specific sites. Keeping the public out of the restoration process, not assessing environmental impacts, and not basing agency actions on the best available science will result in very obvious future environmental disasters, a colossal waste of

taxpayer funds, and continued polarization rather than widespread public support for restoration.

I know of only one lawsuit in Nevada challenging 2 legally flawed fuels reduction projects. An out-of-court settlement resolved the environmental and legal issues and the smaller but more effective projects were authorized to proceed. The Eastern Nevada Landscape Coalition was involved in these two projects, but its role in their design is unclear. The Sierra Club has joined the Coalition to support its collaborative approach to restoration, but expects its proposals to be effective and environmentally sound. Many Nevadans participated in an earlier collaborative process called CRMP - cooperative resource management planning - but were disappointed in the lack of results despite hundreds of hours of meetings, plans, etc. But the Coalition is a new effort which we hope will succeed.

An integral part of restoration planning is determining "why" conditions are not healthy and correcting the causes of the problems. Rather than spending scarce restoration funds on "band aid solutions," projects which treat symptoms, the Forest Service and the BLM should address the underlying management problems which are putting our ecosystems at risk. These include, for example, livestock grazing practices, indiscriminate off-road vehicle and other recreational uses, and fire policies which result in excessive fuels buildup. In Nevada, total fire suppression IS the problem and, unfortunately, national forests and BLM offices are being forced to take their fuels reduction budget to pay the costs for total fire suppression. To continue programs which are causing the need for restoration is not sound public policy.

On the other hand, short-term, expensive band aid solutions may be exactly what is needed in situations where human lives and property, critical watersheds, or invaluable wildlife habitat are at risk from wildfires. These emergency measures should be restricted to areas of greatest risk. The Forest Service and the BLM should analyze which areas in Nevada have experienced the greatest number and severity of wildfires in the last decade and concentrate their resources on these areas first. In Nevada, most recent fires have occurred in sagebrush communities which are then trapped in the cheat grass-fire cycle, less so in our pinyon-juniper woodlands.

Because we don't know exactly what healthy conditions look like in Great Basin ecosystems, our approach should be conservative, using experiments and demonstration projects which will answer the many scientific and social questions of where, how much, how, and what we can "restore" on specific kinds of sites and using project monitoring

for adaptive management. For example, Partners in Flight have identified 9 bird species, dependent on pinyon-juniper woodlands, on its North American continental watch list. Pinyon-juniper woodlands in the Great Basin support over 20% of the world's populations of these birds. Our restoration efforts should not further jeopardize the existence of these species, leading to more listings under the Endangered Species Act. Utilizing the Nevada Sage Grouse Conservation Plan, the Nevada Bird Conservation Plan, and other plans to restore healthy wildlife populations and habitats should help us avoid future train wrecks for birds and wildlife in our restoration efforts. The Forest Service has published two conference proceedings on Pinyon-Juniper ecology and management from which Best Management Practices can be developed.

What can we do, in the long-term, to achieve our restoration goals? Fully implementing Forest Plan standards and the BLM's Standards for Healthy Rangelands would greatly accelerate progress towards restoration. While we've come a long way from historic unmanaged livestock grazing which so altered Great Basin plant communities, we

still have a long way to go. From the 2002 Public Land Statistics, healthy riparian-wetland goals are still to be achieved: only 7.4 percent of riparian areas in Nevada is meeting management objectives; only 7% is at potential natural community; and only 48% of wetland/riparian areas is in proper functioning condition.

In conclusion, many of us are urging Congress to respond to the many threats to healthy Great Basin ecosystems by providing more funds for restoration efforts being initiated by the Forest Service, the BLM, and Western states and communities. Many federal funds are currently being matched by state and community funds and volunteer hours. While

additional funds will help, our land management agencies must use those funds wisely by addressing the management problems causing ecosystem health problems. The growing urgency to address these threats is uniting all Nevadans. Whether we enjoy the public lands for hunting, fishing, or birdwatching, for making our livelihoods from

grazing, minerals, or energy, for relying on its clean water supplies, for experiencing wilderness, for

providing scenic beauty and spiritual inspiration, we all recognize that our future well-being depends on the restoration of healthy Great Basin national forests and public lands.

Thank you for providing an opportunity for Nevadans to express to you today our deep concerns about the need for restoration and describe many of the ways we are addressing restoration challenges and opportunities in the Great Basin.

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